

Dear Editor:

I am writing this letter in response to the article “Language vs. Literature in English Departments in the Arab World” by Marwan M. Obeidat in *ET Forum* Vol. 35 No. 1, which I happened to come across recently.

The author has argued vehemently in favour of literature teaching, especially English literature in the Arab universities; he has criticized the present practice of teaching more linguistics courses in these universities. He has found Joseph John and Mahmud Salih handy to put forward his arguments forcefully. I was a bit agitated when I read the article, as the author was writing about the Arab universities, in one of which I have been teaching for the last seven years. All that has been written sounded utopian to me till I reached the bottom of the article, where I found his address; a teacher of literature in the UAE university. In the universities like his and the ones he has listed in the table, it may be necessary to teach literature only, because they are ‘hi-tech’ institutions with western or western-educated teachers and lap-top-using students. Naturally, the students who join these universities must have appreciable English competence to receive only literature courses.

But, think about the Arab universities in a country like Yemen, where I teach. Even after four years of learning English some of my students cannot spell *Shakespeare* and *Marlowe* correctly. Most of them reach the universities with insufficient English; the reasons may be several. What they need are language courses that develop language and study skills in them, with which they can study literature. When the foundation is weak, how can we build the superstructure? A recent survey by Makthari (2003) is a clear writing on the wall; students are categorical that they join the English departments for learning the language and not literature. It is a pity that we, in Yemen, haven’t realized this fact either and have loaded the English curriculum with literature, beginning with Chaucer and ending with Eliot.

Marwan equates language courses as linguistics courses like Morphology, Syntax, Phonology etc; I agree with him that the linguistics courses serve little purpose. But language courses to me are language skills courses such as reading and writing courses, and these are the courses that will really equip the students in the Arab universities like ours. One more objection to Marwan’s article: He pleads strongly for teaching English literature in the Arab universities, which is strange at this time, when many Arab teachers of English (Khowlah 2002, for example) have been criticizing the English departments for not paying enough attention to the Arab writing in English, which portrays the Muslim Arab students’ culture and heritage. Where is the need for highlighting the Elizabethan and Victorian lifestyles when our students cannot understand and appreciate our own lifestyles in the Arab world? According to a Norwegian novelist, “young people who were cut off from the culture of their parents lacked creativity as well as character” (Seller 1992, quoted in Khowlah 2002). I also perceive a strong need for our students studying, as a part of their curriculum in the universities, the English translations of Arabic literature, because, as Faiq (2003) points out, most of these translations serve an imperialist appropriation of foreign cultures for domestic agendas, cultural, economic, political, and it is our responsibility, as teachers of English, to empower the students to expose the English hegemony.

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References

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